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SUBJECT: PANAMA: EDUCATION SYSTEM NEEDS DRASTIC REFORM
REF: PANAMA 01099

SUMMARY

¶1. (U) Most stakeholders interviewed recently view the most significant challenges faced by Panama's education system as: inequality, lack of quality, cronyism, corruption, poor budget administration, antiquated technology, and politicized education initiatives, the longevity of which lasts only as long as the current presidential administration. Following meetings with 11 education stakeholders (including teacher's union leaders, a non-profit director, a Ministry of Education official, and officials from local universities), POLINTERN gained invaluable insight into the education system and its need for drastic reform. If it is to take full advantage of its growing economic opportunities and sustain a viable democracy, Panama must have an educated, competent, and technologically-savvy citizenry. End Summary.

INEQUALITY AND LACK OF QUALITY

¶2. (U) An overwhelming number of interviewees view the Panamanian public education system as one characterized by inequality. The wealthier one's family is, the better the education one receives and the greater one's access to the tools needed to supplement learning outside the classroom, most observers agreed. There are drastic differences in resource allocation and education quality both between and within the provinces, and particularly between the wealthier province of Panama, and rural, poorer provinces with large indigenous populations. For example, most schools in the province of Panama have indoor plumbing and running water. As noted reftel, some schools in provinces such as the Darien must seek help and resources from non-profit organizations to provide indoor plumbing, running water, electricity, and other resources. This can be attributed to the Panama provinces' larger student population, for school funding is based upon the number of students enrolled. Since provinces like Panama have higher student enrollments, their schools are much more likely to receive higher amounts of funding, thus providing more resources.

LACK OF INFRASTRUCTURE/NEED FOR MODERNIZATION

¶3. (U) Many schools lacked adequate infrastructure, interviewees reported. This lack of infrastructure ranges from schools without indoor plumbing and running water to vocational programs in carpentry that lack sufficient numbers of functioning electric saws. Paula Rodriguez, a parent of public school students in Veraguas province and a recent graduate of the University of Panama's teacher education program, recounted that her children's school lacked science and computer laboratories. Even if these resources were available, they would be useless because the school lacks electricity. In more distant provinces like Chiriqui, only

schooling up to the 9th grade is available. To continue with high school, students must travel, often for hours, to Colon or Panama City. This added travel often deters poorer students, who often have to use any extra time to earn money to help support their families, from continuing their education.

FUNDING

4.(U) While the GOP spends significant resources on its educational system, most respondents noted poor budget administration and resource allocation as a major management problem in Panama's education system. Spending about 6 percent of its GDP on education, Panama allocates significant monetary resources. For FY 2007, the Ministry of Education had an operating budget of over \$790 million. An education tax (seguro educativo) deducts 1.5% of a person's wages from their paycheck and generates about \$80 million per year, of which about \$30 million goes to the Ministry of Education (MEDUCA). MEDUCA is responsible for pre-kindergarten through 12th grade education.

15. (U) A substantial portion of education funding comes from the Canal. According to Luis Lopez, Secretary General of the National Front of Independent Educators, \$0.10 for each ton that goes through the Canal is allocated toward education. For fiscal year 2006, over 296 million tons transited the Canal, resulting in more than \$2.9 million in education funding generated from this source.

16. (U) In 2005 (the latest year for which statistics from MEDUCA are available), there were 755,567 school-aged children actually enrolled in school. (Note: GOP statistics do not distinguish between students enrolled in public or private schools.) MEDUCA allocates \$33 per school year per student to each school for local operating costs, maintenance, and instructional materials.

17. (U) MEDUCA is widely believed to spend a majority of its budget on employee salaries. However, after obtaining MEDUCA's 2007 budget from the Ministry of Economy and Finance website, POLINTER found that MEDUCA spends only 38% of its budget on employee salaries. This is a much lower percentage than some school districts in the United States, which often spend up to 55% or more of their budgets on employee salaries and benefits.

CORRUPTION AND POLITICS OF EDUCATION

18. (U) The majority of the stakeholders interviewed cited corruption and cronyism as major obstacles to education quality and equal resource allocation. Many stated that, while Panamanian schools lacked many resources, teachers and administrators could do better with existing funding if corruption was not an issue. However, Aida Afu de Sanchez, Deputy National Director of Education at MEDUCA, stated that MEDUCA was implementing a competitive hiring process whereby teachers and other education professionals would be hired based on their credentials-- not who they know or because someone owes them a favor, an implicit acknowledgement that cronyism is a problem.

19. (U) Many stakeholders also said that education was too politicized, noting that education programs and important initiatives changed as the presidential administration changes. For example, teacher's union leaders Luis Lopez and Luzmila Sanchez, among others, noted that many of the programs and initiatives run by the First Lady's office, such as her initiative for inclusive education for disabled students, would be discontinued once this presidential administration term ended in 2009. Several stated that education priorities should be a matter of "state policy", not presidential and party politics.

SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

¶10. (U) Forty percent of children who are of preschool age do not attend preschool, and most students do not remain in school long enough to fully grasp basic subjects (Spanish grammar, reading and writing; math; natural sciences; and history/social studies.) In many schools several interviewees noted that there are three shifts, (morning, afternoon, and night), each lasting approximately four hours each. Shifts are necessary because there are not enough classrooms to accommodate all students at once. In many instances, students do not get the full four hours worth of instruction. According to one Peace Corps volunteer whose work centers on education, the school in her community is supposed to begin at 8:00 am but on average starts at about 8:30am. The school session is scheduled to end at around 12:00 noon, but numerous students often leave early, for no reason at all. In between those times, there is a 30 minute recess, a 15 minute break for snack, and lunch before leaving. Therefore on average, these students get approximately 2.5 hours of instruction per day.

¶11. (U) School dropout rates are high because many students do not value education, according to several stakeholders. Some students drop out because they must work to help support a family. The average Panamanian has an eighth grade education. In indigenous communities, most adults only have a second or third grade education. Teacher's union leaders stressed that coverage and availability of high school should be expanded so that all students have the ability to finish high school. Many note the potential benefit of the Network of Opportunities (Red de Oportunidades) program, a program in which the GOP gives a poor family a subsidy of about \$35 per month, to help offset the cost of medical expenses, food, or the income that the student would normally generate. Many interviewees noted that this program could help some students stay in school because they have some additional financial support for their families. Whether the Network of Opportunities program will be continued after President Torrijos' term remains to be seen.

TEACHER EDUCATION/TRAINING

12.(U) According to Luzmila Sanchez and Favio Trotman of the Reformist Front of Panamanian Educators and Paula Rodriguez, a prospective public school teacher, elementary school teachers only need to attend "normal school", (a specialized high school program), to be "qualified" to teach. Secondary school teachers must complete a bachelor's degree program.

13.(U) Trotman stated that teacher education was not sufficient, especially given changes in technology. He noted that teacher education should be more advanced and should include more in-depth training on teaching methods. He also stated that educators should be trained to respond to social, economic, and political problems that not only plague their students, but the country as a whole. When teachers are not properly educated overall, they are unable to adequately educate their students, this union official concluded.

TEACHER PAY/COMPENSATION

14.(U) According to Luis Lopez, teacher's salaries are good compared to the rest of the region (Central and parts of South America). In light of Panama's cost of living, teacher's union leaders believe that the salaries are insufficient, particularly when compared to other professionals with comparable levels of education. Melva Lowe de Goodin, Professor of English at the University of Panama, stated that teachers often had two or three jobs just to make ends meet and that the only educators she knew who hold one job were those that taught at private schools. Although the GOP approved a \$90 per month, phased salary increase for educators in 2006, the starting salary for a teacher in 2008 will be \$575 per month. (The minimum wage for all workers was recently raised to \$300 per month). The canasta basica, or monthly price of a basic basket of food for a family of four, is \$220.71-- approximately 45% of the

current minimum teacher's salary of \$485 per month. The canasta basica does not account for expenses related to shelter, clothing, or health care. Higher positions such as principals and assistant principals make substantially more money, averaging about \$1,200 per month.

SCHOOL CONDITIONS

15.(U) Many educators noted the need for a focus on occupational health, most notably ensuring that violence would not be tolerated in schools. Better behavior and conduct from students is badly needed. Trotman stated that a greater emphasis should be placed on mental health and that all schools should have a psychologist on staff to assist both students and teachers. The Panamanian education system should also be more flexible to respond to the varying needs of students in different areas, rather than the "one size fits all" education system that is currently in place. In this regard, Trotman cited the example that people in some indigenous reservations (comarcas) did not speak Spanish, while the MEDUCA-funded school(s) in those areas only taught in Spanish. In such cases, students and parents were unlikely to appreciate the value of obtaining an education, especially if it was in a language that they did not fully understand. He stated that children in these types of communities should have the chance to learn in their own language and that studies on how to implement bilingual education should be undertaken.

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION (CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS)

16.(U) Inclusive education, in which students with disabilities are integrated into classrooms with typically developing students, is a "hot" topic at the moment, several interviewees noted. It is a special focus and programmatic area in the First Lady's Office, and as a result, in the schools as well. When speaking with educators in two teacher's unions, the overall sentiment was that most educators did not oppose inclusive education-- they actually advocated it-- but they said that more studies and analysis had to be done for the benefit of all students, teachers and other stakeholders involved. They emphasize that international standards regarding the integration of special needs students must be created and implemented.

17.(U) Luis Lopez stated that many special education students were integrated into classrooms without sufficient time to transition effectively. This particular teacher actually taught in an inclusive classroom. Teachers in inclusive classrooms were often thrust into teaching special needs students without the necessary training and skills to effectively teach and respond not only to the special needs child(ren), but also to the tension and issues that arose between students. Through his experience, he said that in an inclusive classroom, there should be no more than 20-25 students total in a class that contained one to two special needs students. Given an average student-to-teacher ratio of 21:1 for the entire country (in 2005), this would seem feasible, although student to-teacher ratios vary widely depending upon grade level and province. Central Panama's primary schools (grades one to six) have the highest student-to-teacher ratio of all provinces at 30 to 1. Los Santos province's middle and high schools have the lowest student-to-teacher ratio at 13 to 1. These ratios cannot necessarily be attributed to more teacher availability in some areas. Other factors like dropout rates should also be considered.

18.(U) Aida Afu de Sanchez emphasized that although the First Lady's Office focused on inclusion in the sense of integrating special needs students, inclusive education also concerned the inclusion of different racial, cultural, and other groups-- similar to diversity initiatives in the U.S. While inclusive education is touted, issues related to race and ethnicity have surfaced in school settings, according to Professor Melva Goodin, former president of the

Afro-Panamanian society and an English professor at the University of Panama. One example of this issue occurred at a private school in Panama (the same private school that the President and First Lady's disabled daughter attends). One of the school's few black students was on track to graduate as valedictorian of his class. There was a massive attempt to oust him, on the basis of behavior problems, although his behavior was no worse than any other boy's behavior at the school. His parents fought to keep him at the school, and he eventually graduated.

VALUES AND EDUCATION FOR AN ENGAGED CITIZENRY

19.(U) One sentiment that resonated throughout the majority of conversations with educators was the need for an educational system that contributed to the development of moral, civic-minded and value-oriented citizens. Many stakeholders stated that there was a sense of little hope among many students and this sentiment, in addition to the education system's other deficiencies, contributes to their low academic achievement. Nobody specifically stated what types of morals and values should be taught nor how to teach these concepts to students. Etilvia Arjona, an educator/administrator at the Universidad Santa Maria la Antigua (USMA), said that teachers need values the most and that they were downright corrupt. Teachers have lost a sense of mission, duty, and calling to the education profession. Even Paula Rodriguez, a prospective teacher, noted that many teachers lack the patience and desire to help students with major learning difficulties reach their fullest potential. Arjona blamed these attitudes on the revolution and 30 years of military rule. In her opinion, 30 years of military rule disrupted the morals and values of the Panamanian people. Because of military rule, populism, and the lack of values that ensued, standards of quality and excellence had been lost and most people going into the education profession simply wanted a credential and a job, according to Arjona.

EDUCATION AND PREPARATION FOR THE WORKFORCE

20.(U) Most say that the Panamanian educational system is not preparing the vast majority of students for the workforce of the 21st century because many schools lack the necessary technology. In addition, most students are unable to pass tests that measure basic academic skills, thus illustrating large deficiencies and ill-preparation for a technology and service-based economy-- particularly the workforce that will be needed for the Canal expansion project and to take full advantage of the U.S.-Panama Trade Promotion Agreement.

21.(U) Asked if the Panamanian education system was adequately preparing students for the workforce, Aida Afu de Sanchez stated that relatively speaking, the Panamanian education system educated students effectively, although there were some deficiencies. Turning the question, she then asked, "Where is the market for graduating students?," implying that few jobs were available for recent graduates. This view runs counter to extensive media coverage highlighting the enormous difficulty in filling positions for bilingual and technologically-savvy workers. One example of this is Occidental Petroleum Corporation's pending construction of an oil refinery in Puerto Armuelles. This project will require more resources and the possible import of skilled labor to complete, since the skilled scientific and technical labor is simply not available within Panama's local population. Also, according to a June article in Panama America, 80% of administrative positions in Panama require an advanced-level command of the English language.

122. (U) Leaving aside openings in the high technology sector or where English-Spanish bilingual skills were desired, Etilvia Arjona cited the example of trying to fill a Spanish-language secretarial position. Of the 15 resumes she received for the open secretarial position, only three resumes were written properly and without basic Spanish grammatical mistakes. All applicants spoke Spanish as their

first language and were high school graduates.

HYPOTHETICAL PROGRAMS TO ADDRESS DEFICIENCIES

23.(U) When asked if they could design a program to address the country's educational deficiencies, most interviewees had simple answers, which include the following:

- Add classrooms so that each grade is taught separately and students no longer have to attend school in shifts.
- Make the school day longer with a set schedule of subjects.
- Have penalties for children who are tardy and awards for those that are on-time or early.
- Foster more cooperation between the educational system and large companies to provide scholarships and training (at the high school and university levels.)
- Increase teacher salaries and teacher training opportunities, in hopes of improving morale.

INTERVIEWEE NAMES AND AFFILIATIONS

¶24. (SBU) From June 25 through July 31, POLINTERN met with the following individuals:

- Larry Brady, Director, Panama Missions (NGO)
- Luis Lopez, Secretary General, National Front of Independent Educators
- Luzmila Sanchez, Secretary General, Reformist Front of Panamanian Educators (FREP)
- Favio Trotman, Finance Secretary, FREP
- Dionesia Cossio, Secretary of National Relations, FREP
- Carlos Langoni, Rector, Florida State University (Panama Branch)
- Etilvia Arjona, Director of the Educational Advising Center, Santa Maria la Antigua Catholic University
- Aida Afu de Sanchez, Deputy National Director of Education, Ministry of Education (MEDUCA)
- Melva Goodin, Former President and Member, Afro-Panamanian Society and Professor of English, University of Panama
- Peace Corps volunteer in Colon province
- Paula Rodriguez, Parent of public school students, recent graduate of University of Panama teacher education program, and prospective public school teacher

COMMENT

25.(SBU) Education is a perennial issue of concern among average Panamanian citizens and political leaders alike. Given the information provided by stakeholders and extensive media coverage regarding difficulty in hiring employees with the needed skills and talent, it is clear that Panama's education system is in dire need of reform. Expectations for employment are high, particularly given the Canal expansion and the construction of an oil refinery in Puerto Armuelles. However, for Panama to truly progress, education reform is essential to ensure that the country can not only take advantage of its many economic opportunities, but also to deepen and broaden its democracy. In order for Panama to realize its fullest potential, it must have an educated public and a talented workforce. This type of dynamism is not possible if the majority of the workforce cannot speak Spanish properly, use basic computer functions, and can only qualify for low-skilled jobs. Therefore, modernization, transformation, and reform of the Panamanian educational system is of the utmost importance if Panamanians wish to benefit from the many forthcoming economic, investment, and development opportunities.

Arreaga